

WCES 2012

## Expected political participation in Italy: a study based on Italian ICCS data

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### Abstract

The International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS) investigates the role of schooling in preparing students for their roles as citizens. The present paper develops a model of students' expected political participation in which factors at school as well as at student level are taken into account. A multilevel regression model is tested including openness in classroom discussion and value of students' participation as school level independent variables and students' civic knowledge and political efficacy as student level independent variables. Various control variables are analyzed. Results show positive significant relationships between the independent variables and the students' expected political participation.

**Keywords:** multilevel regression model; ICCS 2009; political participation

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### 1. Introduction

Political participation is vital for any democratic society: democracy depends on and can only develop through engaged and informed citizens. Moreover, having citizens prepared to take on civic responsibilities could be especially important in today's changing global reality.

Political engagement in youth has been often regarded as the foundation of civic and political involvement in adulthood: adolescence and the transition to adulthood are developmental periods when civic beliefs, values and commitments take shape (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Finlay, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, 2010; Metzger & Smetana, 2010). Preparing young people for active engagement in the civic and political life of their communities and their country has been a long-standing goal of public education (e.g., Flanagan & Faison, 2001). In the last decades, however, the increasing disengagement from politics exhibited by successive generations of young people (e.g., Galston, 2001) has called into question the effectiveness of education and made it pivotal to better understand which factors can promote youths' political participation (Sherrod, Flanagan, Youniss, 2002).

Some recently developed conceptual frameworks proposed that multi-level structures of contexts, that included the wider community, schools and classrooms, home environment and the context of the individual, can influence the engagement of youth (Schulz, Fraillon, Ainley, Losito, Kerr, 2008; Torney-Purta, Amadeo, Andolina, 2010). However, few studies have so far taken into consideration different contextual levels at the same time. One exception is by the International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS), a project conducted by the International

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Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), which aimed to investigate the role of schools in preparing young people for their roles as citizens in society (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010). The ICCS is a large-scale study focusing on students' knowledge, understanding, attitudes, and their contexts, which collected data from grade eight students, teachers and school principals in 38 countries. The ICCS investigated various factors both in the school context and in the individual student context that could influence political and civic engagement.

In the last decades, many studies focused on how youth develop political engagement and identified numerous agents that can facilitate this process. Among of them, democratic and participative classroom climate, civic knowledge and political efficacy have been regarded as especially important and therefore have received much attention in literature (e.g., Amadeo, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Husfeldt, Nikolova, 2002; Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich, Torney-Purta, 2006; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Finkel, 1985; Flanagan, 2004; Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Galston, 2001; Higgings-D'Alessandro, 2010; Krampen, 2000; Perliger, Canetti-Nisim, Pedahzur, 2006; Pollock, 1983; Sherrod et al., 2002; Solhaug, 2009; Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss et al., 2002). However, there is a lack of studies in which these factors have been taken into consideration at the same time. Consistently with the theoretical frameworks about youth engagement (Schulz et al., 2008; Torney-Purta et al., 2010), this study explores a model of students' expected political participation where, by the means of a multilevel approach, the effects of the most studied factors, at school level and at student level, are analyzed contemporaneously.

### *1.1. Purpose of the study*

By the means of the ICCS Italian data, the present paper develops and tests a model of students' expected political participation taking into account factors at school as well at student level. At the school level, the effects of a classroom climate that is perceived as open to discussion of political and social issues and where the participation of students' is perceived as valuable are explored. At the student level, the effects of students' civic knowledge and political efficacy are studied. Moreover, the influences of some students' background factors are taken into consideration.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. Participants and procedures*

The subjects were 3366 eight grade Italian students (51.9% boys) who took part in ICCS 2009. These students attended 172 lower secondary schools randomly selected from the population of Italian lower secondary schools. In each sampled school, whole classrooms were selected, and all the students in each class were assessed for the survey. The data were collected in the classes during the first periods of an ordinary school day.

### *2.2. Instrumentation*

The data for the present study were collected using three ICCS instruments: a cognitive test measuring students' civic knowledge, a student questionnaire containing scales about attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and contextual factors and a school questionnaire administered to the school principals of the sampled schools in order to determine certain school characteristics (Schulz, et al., 2008, 2010).

Students' expected political participation was measured using a three item scale of the student questionnaire in which students were asked to rate the probability with which, as adults, they expected to vote in local and national elections and to get information about candidates before voting. The scale showed a reliability of .82 (Cronbach's alpha) (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, 2011).

Students' civic knowledge was measured with the scaled score on the 80-item cognitive test concerning with civic society and systems, civic principles, civic participation, and civic identities. The test items were scaled using

item response modeling with the one-parameter Rasch model (Rasch, 1960). The median reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the test was .82. (Schulz et al., 2011).

Resources in the local community were measured using principals' reports about the availability of cultural and social resources (such as public libraries, cinemas, theatres, public gardens and sports facilities) in the communities in which the schools were situated. The scale showed a reliability of .80 (Cronbach's alpha) (Schulz et al., 2011).

All the other variables included in this study were measured by means of student questionnaire's scales.

Students' internal political efficacy was measured using a six item scale in which the students were asked to express their agreement with statements reflecting beliefs about their own capacity to engage in politics (e.g. *I am able to understand most political issues easily*). The scale showed a reliability of .84 (Cronbach's alpha) (Schulz et al., 2011).

Students' perceptions of openness in classroom discussions were measured using a six item scale in which students were asked to rate the frequency with which certain events occurred during regular lessons that included discussions of political and social issues (e.g., *Teachers encourage students to make up their own minds*). The scale showed a reliability of .76 (Cronbach's alpha) (Schulz et al., 2011).

Students' perceptions of the value of participation at school were measured using a five item scale in which students were asked to express their agreement with statements about the effects of students' participation (e.g., *Student participation in how schools are run can make schools better*). The average reliability of the scale was .73 (Cronbach's alpha) (Schulz et al., 2011).

The national index of students' socioeconomic background was derived from the following three indices: highest occupational status of parents, highest educational level of parents, and home literacy resources (Schulz et al., 2011).

### 2.3. Data analysis

The multilevel analysis was conducted using two levels: the student level and the school level. To develop and test a multilevel model (Hox, 2002) we used the strategy of randomly splitting the data file in two. The first random sample was used to develop a satisfying model and the second one to check the results found.

The dependent variable was students' expected political participation. The independent variables considered at the school level were: openness in classroom discussion and value of student participation at school. The independent variables considered at the student level were: students' civic knowledge and internal political efficacy.

Since background factors could be correlated with expected political participation (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, Flanagan, 2010; Youniss et al., 2002), the effects of the independent variables were estimated by statistically controlling for some potentially confounding factors of the students' background. The control variables included students' gender (1=female; 0=male) and the national index of students' socioeconomic background at the student level, and the resources in the local community at the school level.

The process of analysis was carried out in three stages:

1. We analyzed a model with no explanatory variables (intercept-only model) to estimate the school intra-class correlation.
2. We analyzed the posited model.
3. We validated the final model developed at step 2 using the second random sample of the data file.

### 3. Results

The intra-class correlation for the model was .047, meaning that roughly 4.7% of the variance of the scores for students' expected political participation is attributable to school traits. Table 1 shows the results of the tested model (estimate based on the full sample).

Table 1. Coefficients of the tested model

Fixed effect	Coefficient	SE	t-value
$\gamma_{00}$	54.144	0.183	296.367**
Resources in local community $\gamma_{01}$	-.016	.022	-.704
Openness in classroom discussion $\gamma_{02}$	.162	.081	2.004*
Value of students' participation $\gamma_{03}$	.144	.066	2.184*
Gender $\beta_{1j}$	.305	.319	.956
National index of students' socioeconomic background $\beta_{2j}$	.398	.191	2.089*
Civic Knowledge $\beta_{3j}$	.0365	.002	17.845**
Political Efficacy $\beta_{4j}$	.248	.020	12.329**
Random effect	Variance component	df	$\chi^2$
Expected political participation, $U_{0j}$	1.040	167	222.369**

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ 

Both the independent variables at student level proved to be positive predictors of students' expected political participation: higher levels of civic knowledge and political efficacy were significantly associated ( $p < .01$ ) with higher probability to expect to participate in political activities in adulthood. Expected political participation showed to be significantly related ( $p < .05$ ) also to both the independent variables at the school level: the students' perceptions about the presence of openness in classroom discussion and about the value of students' participation at school were positive predictors of political participation. The only control variable that proved to be significantly related to students' expected political participation was the national index of students' socioeconomic background ( $p < .05$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

In this study we tested a model of students' expected political participation that explored the effects of factors at school as well at student level. This was done by means of multilevel regression modeling, taking into account a set of control variables, both at school and at student levels.

The results showed that roughly 4.7% of the variance of students' expected political participation was attributable to school traits. As hypothesized, students with higher levels of civic knowledge and political efficacy showed greater levels of likelihood of future political participation. As regards the school factors, perceptions of a classroom climate open to discussion and of worthiness of students' participation in school matters, proved to be positive predictors of the likelihood of future political participation of students. Students' socioeconomic background was the only control variable significantly related to expected political participation. This result is consistent with other studies which have shown positive relations between higher socioeconomic status and higher political participation (e.g., Verba, Scholzman, Brady, 1995).

On the whole, the findings of the present study are consistent with previous researches on the relationships between school's characteristics (i.e. climate and value of students' participation) and students' characteristics (i.e., civic knowledge and political efficacy) and the political engagement of student (e.g., Amadeo, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Husfeldt, Nikolova, 2002; Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich, Torney-Purta, 2006; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Finkel, 1985; Flanagan, 2004; Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Galston, 2001; Higgings-D'Alessandro, 2010; Krampen, 2000; Perliger, Canetti-Nisim, Pedahzur, 2006; Pollock, 1983; Sherrod et al., 2002; Solhaug, 2009; Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss et al., 2002). Furthermore, this study extends previous results because explored a model in which factors at school level and at student level have been taken into consideration at the same time. This study could thus provide some important indications about factors that could be improved in schools in order to promote youth political engagement. More specifically, our findings suggest that schools should improve students'

civic knowledge and also provide a climate in which students can make up their own minds, express their own opinions and discuss various issues with people who have different opinions. Schools should also give students the opportunity to actively participate in decision making processes and to be engaged in political activities, so that they can exercise their political skills and improve their efficacy beliefs. These indications are especially important in view of the worldwide concern about the increasing disengagement from politics exhibited by youth (e.g. Sherrod et al., 2010; Youniss et al., 2002).

In conclusion some limitations of this study should be pointed out. First of all, the results are limited by the use of data based on a cross-sectional design: a longitudinal design would allow us to more clearly determine the relationships between the variables. Moreover, future research should also be conducted to generalize the findings from this study across various national situations and cultural contexts.

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